Rose Coghlan Tells of the Changes Stage Has Undergone in 50 Years

Goes Back to Days of Wallack's, Where She Long Was Leading Woman.

Half Century Behind New York Footlights Lends Authority to Her Views.

By ROSE COGHLAN.

I HAD been in New York for a season or two, but viewed it rather as a girl "unskilled, unlettered" might be expected to do, and at the disappointment I shook the dust his "provincial" city off my sandals and ran back to London exclaiming that I should never return. I did return in 1877 and have been here ever since, knowing no other home and feeling what I am—a true American. Count up the years more definitely and you will find that my retrospect of our stage covers half a century.

And here I pause, but it is only for a breathing spell. Before the recent benefit tendered me by all those kind friends there fell on me the doubt, blighting to an artist, however old, that I might never act again. It has lifted, thank God, and in its place is the confidence that with a period of rest, up in the mountains where I am going to take it, the headaches that have oppressed, even deadened, me, will disappear and in the autumn if a part is offered me that I can play I shall be able to take it.

She Isn't Old in Spirit, Whatever Years May Say

For I am not an old woman . . . perish the thought! Every tooth in my head is strong and is my own (and there are at least thirty of them), every organ functions perfectly; I can walk and carry myself like a young girl, and to judge by appearances I could give half my vitality to some specimen of the so-called "flapper" and still have sufficient for my own use. I love life strongly, but it must be the life of the theater, so, with any chance at all, if I must "lag" I know where I shall do it.

But even while I am making these serious statements there arise in my mind questions that must be in the minds of the people who have always been so good to me—my audiences—and these I want to answer with all candor.

And the first is, Why should an actress who rarely has been "at liberty," as the professional phrase describes one without an engagement, and who for thirty or forty years has commanded a large salary and received it, why, I repeat (or they repeat), should such a one be in want?

Many Reasons Account For Impecuniosity

The popular answer to this question is a reference to the happy go lucky bohemian temperament, long considered sufficient to cover extravagance and folly of artists in money matters. Other answers are not so kindly in intention, sometimes imputing to the artist a tendency to gamble in Wall Street or to live beyond his means. In my own case none of these things explain. Almost from my fourteenth year I have carried the responsibilities of a family. I was no older than that when I went on the stage in England, and at sixteen I played *Lady Macbeth*, so that it did not seem so unreasonable that I should help out near and dear relatives. For my sister Elly I provided a musical education at the Paris Conservatory of Music, and from my own to the succeeding generation I have had the happiness and the opportunity to serve my own dear ones. Farther than this I shall not be constrained to speak.

Always an artist who has gained a certain recognized position on the stage is compelled by her position to live a little beyond her means. To save is not customarily permitted her; she must spend a great sum on her costumes every year, she must go to the leading hotel in every city she visits in a professional tournee. She can do nothing without a personal maid, in many cases a personal manager is as much of a necessity. These expenses, forced on one by the law of *noblesse oblige*, are no more to be avoided than those of entertaining guests in the White House can be omitted from his personal budget by the President.

And to complete what I wish to say on this truly delicate subject, after a woman has been half a century on the stage parts suitable for her to act are not often provided by the modern playwright. Her very reputation frequently stands in her way. It was only recently that I was sent for by a firm of managers and offered a really good role in a modern play by an English author. The script was placed in my hands, terms discussed, everything, in fact, carried out except the signing of a contract.

ROSE COGHLAN.

A few days later I went into the manager's office to carry out this formality and he handed me a cable dispatch from the author in London. It read: "Miss Coghlan has been a star herself; don't want her." This kind of thing happens often.

An Actress of "Certain Age" Difficult to Fit With Part

Thus for almost a decade an actress "of a certain age" has been often unable to find a play suitable to her talents, and when she took one which wasn't it was a stroke of luck if she got more than three months salary out of it. Meanwhile it may be as well to remember that there are twelve months in a year and one has to dine the other nine.

Salaries to-day, irrespective of reputation and ability, are set at a far loftier figure than they were in the 80s. For an example, when I played in the stock company organized by Mr. Lester Wallack after he moved the theater which bore his name up to Broadway and Thirtieth street, although I was leading lady my salary was but $200 a week. It was not sufficient for extraordinary demands upon it. Such a one was made when the play "Forget-Me-Not" was put on. For the three gowns, hats, &c., I wore in that modern play I went to Paris and they cost me a cool thousand dollars, a great sum for those days. Later this expense was considered when at the end of the season the company wished to give me a benefit. I chose to play in the famous and lachrymose "Camille," beloved of the young "tartlets," which is what dear Harry Montague—idol of the matinee girls—used to call them.

Even if it is a digression in this rambling story I can't resist telling about this benefit. Osmond Tearle was the *Armand* and the rest of the cast was made up of distinguished names. The house was packed, the audience was delighted and the flowers I received filled three carriages. The check handed me as the result financially of the benefit amounted to $2,400, which repaid me for being so extravagant in my dressing in "Forget-Me-Not."

Between this, for me, epochal moment and that great night, the last night of Wallack's Theater, when I had the privilege of reciting the epilogue after "The School for Scandal," a great many years were to elapse, years crowded for me with happy work and opportunities that I shall always be grateful for. How much I learned of my art as different parts were given me to study and how much of human nature! I cannot measure these things, but perhaps it is possible for me in a long retrospect to see with after vision the changes that came over the theater.

In that space of time the taste of this city in matters theatrical has altered tremendously, as tremendously as the city itself has changed. Who that knew New York in the '80s and '90s would recognize it now, and who that loved the theater in that bygone time would ever have forecast what it would become?

I do not say unreservedly that the change has been for the better, but the things I do not like in the theater of the present day do not discourage me for the future of the drama. That is too great a thing to be ruined by a transition period of bad taste. It will live and grow better and greater when thousands of its present managers and actors are forgotten. Art of any kind cannot be killed by the transient popularity of certain exponents. And the art of the stage has weathered a good many things.

There was nothing harmful, but much that was trivial in the sort of entertainment prevailing in the period I speak of. The ideals of Lester Wallack were not high, but they were clean, and when he found that his public was tiring of insipid pieces he had one resource which never failed him, the sparkling comedy of the eighteenth century. The little plays that Augustin Daly made over from the German which had tremendous vogue died naturally at the very moment that a society public here and in London were acclaiming Ada Rehan and John Drew in the performance of the leading characters in them. Daly took refuge in Shakespeare and put the comedies on successfully.

Did Not Realize Theater Had Passed From Him

These were but stopgaps, however, and the latter days of this great manager were sad because he did not realize that the theater had passed away from him. His attempts to mount in elegant style British melodrama and his hurried effort to be first with such successes as "Cyrano de Bergerac" were the efforts of a tired and discouraged man. The public was satiated with everything which it had loved for so long. It turned like a child to musical comedy, and for a time Mr. Daly offered this kind of food.

I need not speak of the failures of other more experienced and more famous entrepreneurs, for in the same period I personally made my biggest attempt and came a woeful cropper. This was when as actor-manager I put on Wilde's "Woman of No Importance." Playing the "woman" myself and with the most expensive cast, everybody working as earnestly and seriously as I did for the play's success, it turned out a dire failure. I lost by it every penny I had saved.

As I look back upon this venture I can blame nobody but myself. Before I was 30 my own good angel told me to keep myself to "good woman" parts. Indeed my success in the role of *Vera*, which was one of my most popular roles, should have taught me if the good angel had proved voiceless. It was my own choice to play *Lady Dolly* in that play, but Mr. Wallack was firm and cast me for the seventeen-year-old *Vera*. He engaged Caroline Hill for *Lady Dolly*. I was the more reconciled, for Caroline and I were old pals, playing together in London in Merriwell and Palgrave Simpson's piece "All for Her," in which, by the way, my *Lady Marsden* got brilliant comments.

Virtuous Women Parts Always Succeed Best on Stage

But I did not learn the lesson on the stage which life has taught me; I hankered after the brilliant, sparkling, intellectual parts that playwrights so frequently write for their characters not notable for morals; I preferred the wily, brainy, insidious women, the *Zickas*, *La Belle Russes*, the *Forget-me-nots*, and would never play, at least never choose the admirable, lovable but "mushy" heroines. Had I never appeared in any but in sympathetic, virtuous characters I might have made a fortune in starring. For my days were those when the *Amelias* ruled the stage.

Let me tell a little story about the play "Moths" that concerns Miss Hill and myself. When on the first night of this play came the great scene between mother and daughter, *Lady Dolly* and *Vera*, when she whispered a terrible truth in my ear I shrank back and involuntarily gave a scream of horror. Naturally, since she was an artist, she quickly smothered this scream by placing her hand over my mouth. The applause was tremendous. We responded together to call after call. The papers next day were unanimous in praise of us both, and I sincerely hoped things would continue to be pleasant.

But it was not to be so. On the second night in the same scene Miss Hill anticipated my scream, putting her hand over my mouth before I could utter it and screaming herself. The scene was killed.

I said nothing that night, and next day Mr. Wallack wrote me a delightful letter, telling me I need not have feared playing at 30 the part of *Vera*, for I had beautifully succeeded in portraying a splendid type of young woman. I was not, however, satisfied and would have carried my complaint to him, but he was ill. Instead I went to Theodore Moss, his manager, and inquired if Caroline Hill had a signed contract for the following season. He replied that the management had given her a contract to sign but had not signed it themselves.

"She is very clever, don't you think so?" he added.

"Very," I replied; "a great deal too clever for me. I want my rights as an actress respected, but I cannot fight for them. If Miss Hill remains in the company I shall return to England."

Mr. Moss reminded me that they held my signed contract for another season.

"Yes, I know it," said I, "but I ran away in '73, and I'll do the same in '83."

In these early years that must seem antediluvian to the hundreds of young people playing now I made my first tour and learned something about America and Canada. The tour came about for the reason that Mr. Wallack for a large sum of money was persuaded to let Mrs. Langtry's debut occur in Wallack's Theater, the Park Theater, where she was to have played, having burned down.

Charles Frohman directed our tour. We opened in Toronto, which seemed to be about the only town that had knowledge or appreciation of the famous Wallack company. For the first time in its history it played outside its own theater in a repertoire of the old comedies. The tour was scarcely a financial success. I remember playing in Baltimore at the Academy of Music, and when salary night came around there was in the house about $300.

I shall never forget Mr. Frohman's answer to me when I told him I was ashamed to take the $400, representing my salary, he had handed me. Said he: "You certainly have earned it, for you and Mr. Gilbert are the only members of the company the people outside of New York seem ever to have heard of. Besides, whatever the business is, it's all in a manager's life."

Defense of the Methods Of the Older, Trained Actor

We older people are accused—I think unjustly—of playing a little too strenuously, eclipsing the natural note. For my own part I have kept abreast of the times, eliminating gesture where it is out of place and studying always for the most modern and naturalistic effects. But I cannot forget my early training, which taught me how to speak on the stage so that I can be heard in all parts of the house. This, I contend, is a duty of a stage player.

I go to the theater nowadays and, though seated but a few rows back and not being afflicted with deafness I cannot hear more than a third of the lines spoken. This is false to art, to nature and to every idea for which the stage stands. I might make other criticisms of acting seen during this long experience, but I hate to be called a 'grouch,' and, seriously, I believe the faults of our young people will either be overcome or else these young ones will find other avenues for their activities and a new generation will arise to benefit by their faults.

A few years ago I published in THE SUN some chapters of my life story. Then I took occasion to declare my faith in the certain improvement of the theater. Countless letters reached me due to this publication warmly commending my attitude of optimism. I am writing this while convalescing and am soon to go to the mountains to complete it.

I shall complete something else at the same time if I have the strength, and that is "Rose Coghlan's Fifty Years on the Stage."

Alberta Crops Planted.

EDMONTON, Alberta, June 3.—According to an official crop report of the Department of Agriculture, the third week in May found practically all of the Alberta crop in the ground, the grain beginning to show, while seeding of oats and barley is well under way in all districts. The weather has been cool and showery, with few warm days, and the growth has been rather slow. Moisture conditions continue to be generally satisfactory.

Girls at Radcliffe Must Learn to Swim in Order to Get a Degree

DISTRESSED but lordly upper classmen at Radcliffe are demanding of all and sundry why, and why again, the pool is so crowded this spring. They never seem to be able to get a quiet swim any more. Is wasn't that way when they were freshmen, they declare. Then the pool was used throughout its six weeks period, but there were breathing spells when not more than half a dozen were enjoying its cooling waters. To-day it is full from morning to night and enthusiasm is at a pitch never before reached.

To Miss Elizabeth Wright, for twenty years physical director of the Radcliffe gymnasium, this result is due in the main. Ever since the pool in the basement of Hemenway Gymnasium was opened she has striven to persuade the council to make ability in swimming a requirement of the degree.

"Yes," said Miss Wright, "for six years swimming has been a nominal requirement. But it is hard to insist on girls learning to swim when the pool is open only six weeks each year. When the endowment fund drive is over we may hope to have it in use for a longer period. But, of course, that would necessitate an increasing number of instructors if it were open at the same time as the gymnasium, as well as another janitor to manage both the furnace and the regulation of the water.

"But we have had a real step forward this year. The council has stated that every girl must be able to swim in order to get her degree. On the strength of that we have made the conditions somewhat more severe, although we allow four years for their completion."

The requirements as they now stand include: (1) Floating on the face for a quarter of a minute; (2) floating on the back for half a minute; (3) entering the water by dive or plunge head foremost; (4) swimming twice the length of the pool (a distance of 120 feet) in good form with any standard stroke; (5) swimming the length of the pool in good form with any standard back stroke. Beginners must have three periods a week. This year at least two freshmen learned enough in the first five weeks to be able to fulfill all requirements as well as demonstrate two other strokes.

Miss Wright declares "any average girl should be able to get control of her breathing and learn enough about floating, changing from back to breast and swimming on the back to be at home in the water as well as start on a side stroke in the six weeks period."

The method followed in giving instruction is that originated by the Misses Sheffield. In this rhythmical breathing with the head submerged is insisted on as a first step, followed by a front float and a back float. Confidence is gained by land drill in coming to a standing position from either float and by practice in changing from back to breast and vice versa. When the final stage of back and side stroke is reached it is found that the girls have not the usual tendency of beginners to hurry their strokes, but take them with ease and confidence. Diving lessons are begun as soon as the pupil is far enough advanced and sufficiently sure of herself to go into deep water.

Great interest in swimming has been aroused this spring by a course in five lessons given by a member of the Red Cross Life Saving Instruction Corps. It was announced that only twenty-four could be accommodated, but thirty-three enthusiasts turned out. Accordingly the Red Cross kindly allowed their representative, Robert Miller, to give three extra lessons in order that more might enjoy the instruction. On the last day a demonstration of resuscitation was given for the benefit of the whole college.

Half strangled girls can still be observed in the pool daily trying out on a friend the break of "the front strangle hold," the "over arm carry" or the "saddleback carry." By the end of the course nearly all could break from the various holds possible to a drowning man, carry a person their own weight the length of the pool in several different ways and lift a person their own weight in shallow water and carry him ashore. They were also expert in fetching a weight from the bottom of the pool and in applying artificial respiration. The interest has spread like wildfire, and many who did not take part this year are already planning for next.

The annual spring swimming meet between the classes has taken place for twenty years.

The interest this year is augmented by the fact that the class of '23 is to present to the college a silver cup in memory of their classmate, Ellen Randolph Bartin, the youthful winner of last year's meet, who died in Paris this winter. This will be competed for annually. Besides the winner of the whole meet each winner of an individual event is awarded her class numerals.